

the young man's attempted robbery to a legislator who serves on the commission, I was told, "If he [Manzanares] was an Anglo, the police wouldn't have pulled their guns so quickly." The Human Rights Commission is obviously too busy auditing racial attitudes to take notice of the human rights abuses wrought by thieves and murderers.

*William Grigg is a columnist for the Daily Herald in Provo, Utah.*

## Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

### Capture the Flag, Part I



In an earlier letter I cheered my buddy Chris's suggestion that announcements at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics be given in both Southern and Yankee English but pointed out that on preliminary form Atlanta's civic leaders are unlikely to cotton to the idea. I didn't mention another of Chris's proposals, one they're guaranteed to like even less: he wants to fly the Stars and Bars at the Games. My first impulse is to unleash a rebel yell for that proposition, too, but let's think about it a bit before we write Maynard Jackson.

Chris observes that the Catalans got to fly their flag in Barcelona, and personally I like the idea of the South as a sort of American Catalonia. But we have a problem that the Catalans don't. Unlike their historic symbols, which are signs of national unity, ours are mostly the symbols of the Confederacy, which these days signify and inspire mostly discord.

Witness the fact that many of Georgia's and virtually all of Atlanta's political bigshots are now campaigning to end what the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* calls the "disgrace" of including the Confederate battle flag as part of the Georgia state flag. Far from wanting to fly the rebel flag at the Olympics, these folks want it completely out of sight before the television cameras come to the

City Too Busy to Hate and beam it out worldwide. The *Journal-Constitution's* editorial cartoonist even did a scurrilous little number juxtaposing the Nazi flag flying over the 1936 Olympics and the Southern Cross waving over the 1996 Games. (The cartoonist, a young man from Seattle, claims he got some death threats, but not nearly enough to suit me.)

All the arguments for and against changing have been aired at length in the Georgia press, and they even spilled over to the editorial page of *USA Today*, which gratuitously urged Georgia to rejoin the Union, then printed the predictable letters. Most of the pros and cons you can probably reconstruct for yourself, and I won't rehash them here. If you have trouble seeing the case for keeping things as they are, write a group called Northeast Georgians for the Flag and Southern Heritage and ask for a copy of their brochure (Box 2731, Athens, Georgia 30612—send them a buck or two to cover expenses). The anti-flag arguments are pretty obvious, I should think; we've heard them in a dozen other disputes.

One complication in the Georgia case, however, is that the present flag was adopted only in 1956—to symbolize resistance to desegregation, its opponents claim. Its defenders find in the record of the legislative deliberations no signs of that motive and a good many indications that the point was to honor the Confederacy in light of the upcoming Civil War centennial. Those who object to honoring the Confederacy, of course, don't see that as an improvement.

Another factor that gives the Georgia dispute a special twist is the nature of Atlanta. The Peach State's capital is the kind of place where you get off an airplane and confront a sign that says "Welcome to Atlanta: A World-Class, Major-League City." (I mean, really: try substituting London or Tokyo or even Los Angeles or Budapest in that line to see how pitiful it is.) When Atlanta's Convention and Visitors Bureau recently hired McCann-Erikson to devise a slogan for the place, the best the Mad. Ave. boys could come up with was the insipid "Atlanta: Hometown to the World." (My buddy Martin did better off the top of his head with "Atlanta: The South Stops Here.") Anyway, a town this insecure doesn't want to emphasize its true, provincial identity or

the ambiguity of its history.

Nevertheless, it seems that most white Georgians don't share their betters' distaste for the flag of their ancestors. A Mason-Dixon poll last July, for instance, showed that 66 percent of all white Georgians—even 61 percent of all white Atlantans—wanted to keep the present flag and that only 29 percent wanted to scrap it. Not even many black Georgians dislike it, if we can believe the polls: fully 59 percent of them want to retain the current flag. Given this, and the fact that Atlanta still doesn't muster a majority in the Georgia legislature, the political handicappers I've talked to predict that the flag will be retained. But one Atlanta pol told me at supper one night that he and his friends will simply not fly the state flag, if they can't get it changed back to what it was before 1956. (He didn't know, of course, and apparently hardly anyone else does either, that the old Georgia flag is actually the Stars and Bars, the Confederate national flag proper, with the state seal—and motto, "Wisdom, justice, moderation"—substituted for the stars. It was adopted in 1879 with the restoration of home rule after Reconstruction.)

Anyway, when these conflicts arise, my first reaction—and surely that of many sensible people—is always to wonder whether our politicians and journalists don't have something better to do. After all, it's not as if Alabama and Georgia and North Carolina don't have some real problems, even a few real problems of race relations. I feel like "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce, 19th-century bishop of Oxford, confronted with a bitter controversy over whether priests could wear chasubles. "What a plague it is," His Lordship complained, "that people cannot have common sense as well as earnestness."

But like the chasuble question, this is important, if not in itself, at least in the matter of what it stands for. The Confederate flag is as offensive to some of our fellow citizens as Romish vestments were to some of Wilberforce's, and in many of the same ways. Like their Victorian counterparts, our latter-day Roundheads see scraps of colored cloth as representing doctrines they find repugnant, doctrines once thought to have been extirpated for all time. Those of a more Whiggish disposition—like Atlanta's leaders—see the flag as an emblem of opposition to progress and

enlightenment. The flag's partisans, meanwhile, refuse to accept their adversaries' definition of what it is they are defending. And, God knows, everybody is earnest.

Can we sort this out? Is there anything helpful to be said, or must this all just come down to a political contest of wills?

First of all, let's stipulate that it's nobody's business but Georgians' *what* goes on their flag. *USA Today* may not have the sense to stay out of this affair, but Southerners, at least, should recognize that states' rights is one thing the Southern Cross stands for, and if a state can't even choose its own flag . . . well, maybe it's time to rethink secession. But on the larger question of what an appropriate symbol of Southern unity might be, I do feel entitled to some opinions, and in fact I have two: that the South needs and deserves *some* sort of symbols and that the Confederate flag won't do anymore.

Let me tell a story. Some time back a friend sent me an issue of the *Jaguar Journal*, a student publication of the Falls Church, Virginia, high school. It contains a rather lame attack on the Confederate flag as a symbol of slavery and oppression, paired with an eloquent defense by a young woman named Wendi Crouch, who quotes the country-music group Alabama: "And we were leaning, leaning on / The everlasting arms of love, / Livin' all the simple joys / This Dixie boy is made of." A survey revealed that nearly half of the school's multiracial, multicultural student body felt that things are just fine as they are; as one student put it, the flag is a "symbol of everything the South stands for: unity and pride." Another third felt that it shouldn't be flown officially (for instance, over state capitals). Only one student in six felt that display of the flag should be banned altogether.

Now, I've said many snide things (some of them in this magazine) about northern, or "Occupied," Virginia: maybe I've been too harsh. But notice that the students' defense of the flag was not on the grounds of its association with the Confederacy. Those who spoke for the record valued it simply as an emblem of Southern pride *in the present*.

But that pride is considerable. At the William and Mary commencement a couple of years ago a student speaker shared with the audience what his fa-

ther had told him as he began his freshman year: "Remember what you come from," his daddy had said. "You're a Virginian and a Southerner." (My informant was reminded of his own father's parting words, 30 years ago: "Well, son, you'll meet all kinds up here.") Southerners feel themselves to be citizens of no mean city, and if the Confederate flag is the only symbol of our community available, we'll use it—one reason many who don't care much about the Confederacy one way or the other are attached to its flag.

Regret it or not, however, it's simply a fact that fewer self-identified Southerners each year feel any attachment to the Confederate heritage. In the first place, an increasing proportion of native whites either don't know or don't care what their ancestors' sympathies were. Thirty-seven percent of the white respondents to a 1992 Southern Focus Poll didn't know whether they had family who fought in the Late Unpleasantness, and another 30 percent said they knew they didn't. Of the remaining third, one in six had only Union ancestors and a quarter had kinfolk on both sides. (Both ignorance and mixed ancestry are more common among younger Southerners than among older ones.) In other words, something under 20 percent of today's white Southerners have an exclusively Confederate heritage, and know it.

In addition, fewer and fewer self-identified Southerners are native whites to begin with. Both Asian- and Hispanic-Southerners are more common each year: I know some of each. A good many migrants from Yankeedom are quite ready to sign up, if we'll let them. And surveys show that most Southern blacks now identify themselves as Southerners—a welcome development, in my view. But you can't expect most of these folks to be fond of the Confederate flag. In particular, the flag divides Southerners on racial lines. Asked by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* whether the flag is more a symbol of racial conflict or of Southern pride, Southern whites picked regional pride 76 to 17 percent, while blacks saw racial conflict 58 to 31 percent. (Blacks were far more tolerant of the song *Dixie*, seeing it as a symbol of Southern pride by a margin of 48 percent to 40 percent.)

Given all this, it seems to me that making all "true Southerners" salute the Confederate flag excludes altogether too many people who have a right to the la-

bel, and who could be valuable recruits to the cause. On grounds of both prudence and doing the right thing, there's much to be said for finding or devising other symbols of regional identity, more inclusive ones that can be saluted by anyone of good will. Here we can learn from the Catalans. In their view anyone who moves to their region and adopts their ways (in particular, their language) is Catalan, period. This means they don't face the problem that Southerners now face, that of being a minority in much of their own land. Migration to Catalonia contributes to the nation's economic and political strength, offsetting its relatively low birthrate without undermining its unity.

If we give up pretending that the Confederate flag has a claim on the loyalty of all Southerners—well, then, of course state governments ought to take it off their flags. (I'm not wild about some of the company that conclusion puts me in, but it seems inescapable.) Let those who honor the Confederate heritage do so privately.

But let's not go overboard. The symbols of the Confederacy shouldn't be denied to those who are entitled to them and moved by them. Sixty-odd years ago, Allen Tate complained about "well-meaning orators" who told white Southerners "they need not be ashamed of a grandfather who fought with Lee, that the grandfather could not have known how God had to use four years of war to show them the righteousness of Big Business and the iniquity of the farm." But more has changed since 1930 than the *New Republic* (in which Tate wrote): I can't recall the last time I heard someone telling white Southerners that. Indeed, those whose grandfathers fought with Lee must often feel these days that they *are* being asked to apologize for their heritage, if not to renounce it altogether. As the Marxist historian Eugene Genovese, characteristically galling, observed during an exchange on this subject at a recent meeting of the American Studies Association, no one should be required to spit on his ancestors' graves. We should all wish the latter-day Confederates luck in rescuing their symbols from the racist trash who have lately sought to appropriate them.

More on these matters next month.

*John Shelton Reed writes from Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and hates to be called a "moderate."*